

## The Shortcomings of the Interwar Romanian Advertising

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**Abstract:** The economic growth that characterized the interwar period meant the development of Romanian advertising. But it was blamed for many sins. For example, the press was accused of endangering the health of readers by hosting on the pages of the newspaper advertisements made for all sorts of dubious products. Some authors claimed that “the printing abuse” was a *trigger* for suicide. Also in some texts it shows that behind the advertising contracts it was blackmail. The advertisement was done in a very unprofessional manner, presented the unaesthetic aspects of large cities, which was another point from the “sins” list of interwar Romanian advertising. In the years between the two world wars, the central or local publications hosted in their pages many articles where different authorities debated how the Romanian publicity was achieved. Our study aimed at precisely these texts, which were supposed to be the “manuals” of advertising, unfortunately they were rather small for all those interested in advertising. Among the documentation sources used for their drafting there have been, as testified by some authors, courses taught at commercial schools, but also advertising conferences that were broadcast on radio stations abroad.

**Keywords:** media history; the history of advertising; printing; advertising; poster

### 1. Introduction

In the introduction of reference works about *advertising* it shows that this advertising did not develop into an empty space, its development being closely linked with many social, economic and cultural factors. The same source shows that, despite the changes made in the last two centuries, *advertising* has kept its role unchanged, that of *selling tools used to bring together buyers and sellers in order to exchange goods and services*. Here it is pointed out that advertising is an umbrella term that is used to describe both simple and complex commercial advertisements. On the Romanian market, advertising has occupied its space at a relatively slow rate. The economic growth that characterized the interwar period meant also the development of this

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type of activity. In the years between the two world wars, the central or local publications hosted in their pages many articles where different authors debated the way in which the Romanian advertising was achieved. Our study aims at precisely these texts, which were supposed to be the “manuals” of advertising; it is true that they were actually small for all those interested in advertising. Among the documentation sources used for their drafting, there have been, as some authors confessed, courses taught at commercial schools, but also conferences on advertising which were broadcast on radio stations abroad.

## 2. The Advertisement and the Suicide

In an article entitled “*Critica și reclama/The Criticism and the comercial*” published in 1925 in the *Universul Literar/Literary Universe*, signed by GT Niculescu-Varone, it shows that advertising is a *brief eulogy of an object put into commerce*. The author stresses that the advertisement is only “*a commercial process which can add or decrease the value*” of a product. Niculescu Varone ends his article showing that, often, advertising is a kind of *auto-suggestion*, which influences the reader. (Niculescu Varone, 1925, p. 2) Another author talks about the so-called pharmaceuticals specialties which, although they had no medical value, with the help of advertising, especially in newspapers, arrived to be consumed by many people, children or adults. (Hunian, 1936, pp. 28-29) In other words, the press was accused, by hosting in the pages of the newspaper, of having advertisements for all kinds of dubious products, which were guilty of endangering the health of many Romanians. But it was not the first time the press was criticized for it. Basile C. Livianu, in his article *Furia suicidului. Studiul cauzelor principale care viciază organismul nostru social/The rage of suicide. The study of main causes vitiating our social body*, published in 1900, showed that the excesses committed by the press were part of what he called “press abuse”. Livianu believed that this “press abuse” was among the main causes of the high number of suicides that the Romanian authorities had to deal with in those days. (Livianu, 1900, pp. 27-29)

But there were complaints on other shortcomings of advertising. Nichifor Crainic, for example, argued that in some cases, behind the advertising contracts there were in fact blackmail actions (Crainic, 1991, p. 207). In an article from *Hiena/Hyena*, published in 1922, Pamfil Șeicaru showed that owners of large companies of that time controlled, using various forms of advertising, the editorial publicity of newspapers which enjoyed real success from the public. (Șeicaru, 1922, pp. 2-3)

Regarding the street commercial in 1933, in an article in the publication of the Urban Institute of Romania it showed that the Romanian advertising was made generally by dilettantes who gave, through their actions, poor unaesthetic aspect of the cities, these ads were true insults for the eye. (Sfintescu, 1933, p. 561)

### 3. The Trader and Publicity

In 1930 in the *Revista economică/Economic Review* it was published a study on how to effectively advertise. The article, entitled “*Comerciantul și publicitatea/The trader and publicity*” shows that many of the texts of the Romanian advertisements were written in “a moment of inspiration”, people without any training in advertising. According to the author, advertising had a much bigger role than many people would be tempted to believe at a first glance. Advertising shows itself through text, it is not only the art to provide a product, but it is the art of knowing what to offer. Among the means that can be used for advertising there were listed as follows: *printed posters, illustrated posters, illuminated posters, newspaper advertisements, circulars, brochures, catalogs and the samples*. Also in the article they were offered even a few models of publicity texts. The author also shows that the person who undertakes the task to advertise a product must use its high price, which may be a barrier to purchase, into his advantage.

In an article published in 1899 in a printing almanac, it shows that, although it may seem strange to many readers, *inserts (advertisements)* from newspapers appeared long after the appearance of the press. The same source shows that in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the first journal published in France, Germany or England were not only political information, but also sometimes information about natural phenomena, festivals, etc. Later, they appeared in official or semiofficial information in newspapers, which until then were notified to the public by the “*outcry in the street and wall posters*.” Thus it was created a context necessary for *private inserts*. The first ones that resorted to this way of informing the public about the occurrence of certain services or products have been, as shown in the article, booksellers and printers, which in most cases were newspaper owners.

In 1929 the *Almanahul graficei române/Romanian graphics Almanac*, Virgil Molin published the article “*Tiparul și reclama/Printing and advertising (insert)*.” The article is meant to be a lesson to any printer on how it can “contribute all its artistic and technical resources to prepare an insert”. The text contains also elements of history of the *insert*, but the most consistent is the one referenced to the technical

aspects of achieving *insertion*. However we will not go into such details. The author stops also on another extremely important issue: *where are the inserts*? The answer to this question is very important because *an insert*, if it occurs in an inappropriate body of advertising, which is opposed to the creative nature of the designed ad, will have no effect. The author makes a classification of publicity bodies, according their feature.

*Daily press.* There are summarized the independent newspapers from the political point of view, but also those with political coloring. Due to their large circulations, these newspapers were usable for all kinds of advertising, particularly for small advertising. The space for advertisements in newspapers was however expensive compared to other types of publications.

*Weekly publications.* Politically or independently enrolled, weekly publications included local provincial newspapers. Reduced circulation of these papers is usually exclusively for the readers of a particular locality. Weekly newspapers are very suitable for local articles.

*Periodicals.* These address to a certain circle of readers (*Revista muzicii/Music magazine*, *Informatorul tehnic/Technical informant*, *Revista teologică/Theological Review*, *Învățătorul român/The Romanian teacher*, *Viața literară/Literary Life*, *Adevărul literar/Literary Truth*, *Universul Literar/Literary universe*, etc.). There are usually inserted by publishers, bookstores, decorative art specialists, perfumes and cosmetics factories, furriers, makers of musical instruments, etc.

We find inserts in *books* and *pamphlets*, such as address directories, calendars and almanacs, catalogs and books of general interest. Of these, the advertisement made by means of year books with addresses and calendars is the most effective. The last category of prints completed with inserts is that of *theater programs*, *lists of food*, *files* and *packaging*. At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, some publications dedicated large spaces to texts presenting the way in which it can be done an effective commercial advertisement in Romania. In *Almanach tipografic/The printing Almanach*, G. Filip makes the following statements: “*It is undeniable that the soul of industry and the commerce is today the advertising. Any commercial or industrial firm either fabricated or with its products no matter how good they are, without advertising it can only have very little success.*” (Filip, 1897, p. 100) The author’s pattern recommended, naturally, the American one. Three years later, in an article in *Noua Revista Română pentru Politică, Literatură, Știință și Artă /The New Romanian Review for Politics, Literature, Science and Art*, Sextil Pușcariu speaks of the high

quality level to which the poster has reached in the Western cities. Some posters according to Pușcariu, could be considered, despite the large number of challengers, true works of art. (Pușcariu 1900, pp. 328-329) At a distance of nearly three decades of text appearance of Sextil Pușcariu, Virgil Molin publishes in *Almanahul graficeî române/ The Almanac of the Romanian graphics*, an article entitled “*Afișul artistic/The artistic poster*” showing that the way in which an advertisement should be made in some state is closely related to the level of cultural development of the state. In his text, Molin talks about the easiness with which there can be identified the characteristics of a people only by looking at a poster:

“As for example every time I see posters purely German, i.e. conceived in the Teutonic-Reich pattern, I remember the German people’s feature. As for large spots in a strong black or figures and ornaments stylized expressed and shaped with precision are typical for the northern German race, closed soul, massive, orderly and precise in all its gestures, in great contrast with the French poster for example which has thin lines, delicate, subtle colors, light and stylish design, almost feminine. Or in the South, Italy and Spain, where colors appear more vivid, more heated, as the character of the people with strong blood. And after the reproductions of American posters that I have in my collections, a slight deduction can be made, emphasizing the note with the specificity of this nation: the American poster is as an American, never concerned with the past (as it has no history), lives for today, concerned only with the needs of the present. The exposure is almost photographic, pervaded by a convincing realism and materialism. It always emphasizes the practical side of the offered object (article). For the American is only an eminently practical and realistic man.” (Molin, 1928, pp. 145-146) Molin argues that, unfortunately, about the Romanian poster it cannot be said too much. The reason is that, at the time, there was no Romanian style in advertising. What was done in Romania was a hybrid resulting from the encounter of two lines of influence: the German and the French.

#### 4. The Cost of Advertising

Details on how the commercial advertising activities were taxed we find in a *Bucharest's financial regulation*, issued in July 18<sup>th</sup> 1936. According to the rules stated in the municipality of Bucharest the public display was made under certain conditions. The service of Bucharest's public display was the one who could authorize the display of advertisements of any kind on public and private properties, as well as any advertising vehicles and commercial people. To this end, the

authorization is issued following a request of those concerned, where it should show the following elements: the way, the content, the advertising dimension, the place and duration.

To release the authorization of posting the following charges were laid:

- 30 lei / month for advertising fixed with an area of up to 0.5 sq.m;
- 50 lei / month for advertising fixed with an area of 0.5 sq m up to 1 sq.m;
- 40 lei / month for advertising fixed with an area of 1 sq m to 5 square meters (fee applies per sq m beyond the first mp);
- 30 lei / month for advertising fixed with an area of 5 square meters to 10 square (fee applies for each sqm which exceeded the first 5 mp);
- 20 lei / month for fixed advertisements over 10 square meters (sqm charge applies for extra each);

In the same decree, the following charges were laid:

- 200 lei / day for an advertising vehicle;
- 100 lei / day for an advertising person;
- 70 lei / day for the second man with the same advertisement;
- 50 lei / day for the third person (or more) with the same advertisement;
- 2,000 lei / day for posters and commercial leaflets distributed on the streets, in markets, in public places or dispersed by plane or vehicles;
- 2,000 lei / day for any advertising of any other kind that are not on the above categories.

In some cases, the above rates could be reduced even by 50%. *The regulation* was forbidding the display of publicity materials that could endanger the public order and security. (Alexianu, 1936, p. 62) The ads from the newspaper pages were appreciated by many readers of the press. The reason was that it responded actually to the real needs of the public. Prices for the *big publicity* could vary, depending on: the size of the advertising model, the page where it was applied and the place on the page. Regarding the small publicity different fees were charged. The difference between prices was given by the domain of interest targeted by the ad. For example, in 1928, in *Universul/The Universe*, a small publicity ad, which should be of at least 10 words, had the following charges: 3 lei per word in the case of *working requests*, 4 lei per word for *offering work and sales*, 5 lei per word when the text regarded *renting apartments and rooms or marriages*. Prices do not differ much from those in the *Dimineata/Morning* newspaper.

Those wishing to advertise products or services that they sell could call for extra promptness to the advertising agencies. For instance, *Advertising Agency D. Adania*<sup>1</sup> could meet customers' wishes with the following services: publishing announcements and advertisements in all newspapers in the country and abroad; taking small publicity ads for people using the "original prices of newspapers"; *CFR/Romanian Railways* advertising; illuminated commercials; advertising in the air, and finally, publicity in the main world trade yearbooks. Another example is Anonymous Society "Rudolf Mosse," which functioned as publishing house, bookstore and advertising agency. Regarding the advertising activity, the company offered to its customers the following services: public advertisements in all newspapers in the country and abroad, placing posters and illuminated ads in all major cities and creative artistic projects. The company was proud to have agents advertising in all major cities in Europe and the United States. Also, an advertisement appeared in the newspaper *Cuvantul/The Word* (November 1924), the Anonymous Society "Rudolf Mosse" announced the release at the beginning of next year, the Yearbook of *Romania for Commerce, Industry, Crafts and Agriculture, being the only complete yearbook from Romania*.

## 5. Conclusion

Advertisers however had not only admirers, many were those who considered suspicious the activities of these companies. Advertising activities have suffered greatly after the establishment of the communist regime in Romania. The nationalization, with all that it meant made the promoting practice of products and services to know major changes. Socialist advertising after the "new type" had to be something else than what the capitalist advertising was.

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<sup>1</sup> *Agenția de Publicitatea D. Adania* it was the first advertising agency in Romania and named after its founder. (Petcu, 2007)

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